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UNCLAS LILONGWE 000398

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THE REHABILITATION OF HASTINGS BANDA

1. SUMMARY. President Bingu wa Mutharika's quest to create a political base after leaving the United Democratic Front has coincided with the growing nostalgia among Malawians for the era of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. The failures of former president Muluzi's decade in power have directly resulted in the resurrection of Dr. Banda's image as an effective leader, despite his authoritarianism. END SUMMARY.

2. President Bingu wa Mutharika's quest to create a political base after leaving the United Democratic Front (UDF) has coincided with a growing nostalgia among Malawians for the Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda era, which preceded Bakili Muluzi's decade of high crime, rampant official corruption, and maladministration. The President has recently renamed several public facilities to reflect Banda-era infrastructure development. Lilongwe International Airport is again known as Kamuzu International; Lilongwe Central Hospital is again Kamuzu Central Hospital; Chichiri Stadium has been changed back to Kamuzu Stadium. All of these changes were well received by Banda's Malawi Congress Party (MCP) and the nostalgic general public, as most Malawians fondly recall the Banda era when "trains ran on time", crime and corruption were low, and businesses flourished.

3. Mutharika has played on this public nostalgia as part of a bid to win over the MCP-dominated central region that was Dr. Banda's political stronghold. Thus far, Mutharika's most important move to co-opt MCP support has been his decision to implement Muluzi's long unfulfilled promise to build a Dr. Banda memorial mausoleum. The move even convinced one of Dr. Banda's grandnephews to leave the MCP for the President's new Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Another of Mutharika's tactics is his emphasis on food security, which is reminiscent of Dr. Banda's focus on agriculture.

4. Banda the Dictator, however, has not always been a revered figure. After Muluzi was elected President in May 1994, he deliberately intensified the anti-Banda atmosphere that began in 1992 with the democratization process. Malawi's national identity had been tightly intertwined with that of the country's president-for-life, and by taking Banda's name and image out of common circulation, Muluzi sent a clear message that it was time for the country to move forward. Names of the vast majority of roads, bridges, and public facilities that bore Kamuzu Banda's name were changed. Dr. Banda's face was removed from all paper money and most coins. The suppression of Banda's image peaked in January 1995 with the arrests of Dr. Banda and his MCP "strongman" John Tembo for the 1983 murders of three cabinet members and an MP. The acquittal of Dr. Banda and his co-accused resulted in the Muluzi administration slowing and later abandoning its vilification of Banda. Thus when Dr. Banda died in November 1997 Muluzi didn't hesitate to organize a grand State Funeral. However, the failures of Muluzi's decade in power have now directly resulted in the resurrection of Dr. Banda's image as an effective leader, despite his authoritarianism.

5. COMMENT. The nostalgia for Dr. Banda is a sign that the general public senses a vacuum in the role of national leader. Since taking office after controversial elections, Mutharika's challenge has been to establish himself and his new party as both a leader and a political force. In the course of helping rehabilitate Dr. Banda's image, Mutharika seems to also be working to distinguish himself as the rightful successor to Dr. Banda. Mutharika's claim that the political, social, and economic stability of the Banda era is back does not amuse the UDF protectors of Muluzi's legacy and is seen as an insult to the "founding father" of Malawi's democracy. Mutharika as the New Banda is also viewed as a threat to the national leadership ambitions of the MCP, making President Mutharika's quest to capture the MCP support base unlikely to succeed.

GILMOUR

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Is this correct??? NO